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THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE GOSPEL FOR THE SALVATION OF SOCIETY

SHAILER MATHEWS

Can the gospel save society? There are thousands of earnest Christians who believe it cannot; that the social order in which we live is so hopelessly corrupt and Satanic that it is idle to imagine its ever being saved. In their view the work of the church consists in the rescue of individuals from a ruined world and the patient endurance of evil until Christ returns to establish a supernatural kingdom.

There is, also, an increasing number of men and women who believe that the social order must be saved by being transformed, but who believe that the gospel is altogether incapable of working the transformation. They look to the development of class hatred as the means of finally bringing about a fraternity.

There is still a third class who believe neither in the second coming of Christ nor in socialism, but who do believe in the finality of success. To them the gospel is a synonym for weakness or a clever device which the strong have evolved for the purpose of keeping the weak submissive.

The distrust of the social sufficiency of the gospel represented by these three classes is not to be answered by complacent rhetoric. The accompanying article, given in its original form at the meeting of the Baptist World Alliance, endeavors to show that all three classes of skeptics are mistaken.

The gospel is not identical with an orthodox theology. Orthodoxy is the result of an effort to formulate philosophically and authoritatively what an age believed the gospel to be. How far such results have been from the simplicity of the New Testament any student of church history knows only too well. Orthodoxy as we find it in many a creed comes to us wet with the blood of our spiritual forefathers and rank with the smoke of the stake.

True evangelicalism is a message not of doctrinal precision, but of life. The teaching and life and resurrection of Jesus reveal that God is Love, and that the supreme good of life is to be loving, like God. That is the essence of the gospel. It is not a call to duty or an

exposition of philosophy, but the announcement that God can be trusted as a Father, that he will help all those that trust him, and that consequently love is the final law of life.

The social teaching of Jesus is the extension of this principle. His life of service and his death upon the cross are the exposition of the gospel in his own individual life, and his words regarding marriage and wealth are its application to the social order in the midst of which he lived. But, strictly speaking, the gospel as the gospel has no specific social philosophy or program. Each age must apply to its own conditions and problems the principle contained in the supreme message that God is Love, that sinners can be forgiven, that men can

trust a loving Father for their daily needs, and that just because God is Love it is better to serve and sacrifice than to fight and win.

I. Why the Gospel Is Judged Socially Insufficient

The three greatest objections to the social sufficiency of the gospel are, (1) the enmity between the gospel and the economic order, (2) the emphasis of the gospel on brotherhood rather than on justice, and (3) the perplexing commentary on the power of the gospel given by the history of the church itself.

1. The Gospel v. the Economic Order

1. The enmity between the gospel and economic order is by no means a modern discovery. All through the Christian centuries men have urged poverty as the indispensable prerequisite for holy lives or, as in the case of some of the Anabaptists, communism. And long before them Jesus himself had pointed out the sharp distinction between the service of God and the service of Mammon, and had distinctly warned his followers against anxiety as to material goods.

But the antithesis between an economic order which makes the creation of wealth superior to human well-being, and a call to trust in God as loving and to the love of men in the spirit of true fraternity, was never so manifest as today. It is becoming unendurable.

The crisis of civilization lies in the struggle to determine who shall control the surplus of the economic process, and the gospel must flee or help meet this crisis. The only evangelization that will save the world is something more than the preaching of an escape from punish-

ment to come; it is rather such a transfusion of the forces of civilization with the ideals of the gospel as to bring justice and fraternity into the economic order. And that can never be accomplished in a single generation. Each new advance in civilization in heathen lands will bring Christianity there, as in Europe and America, face to face with the vastly more difficult problem of the socialization of the ideals of Jesus in an industrial order. The conquests of the Christ will not be complete until he has conquered the control of the economic surplus of all lands.

Within the last few years we have passed from the belief that unrestricted competition is a good and have begun as a community to regulate not only the financial but also the social powers of great corporations. Yet the complete triumph of the ideals of the gospel seems distant. While the Christian must welcome every act of restraint which embodies even an approach to the ideals of the gospel, yet the fundamental difference between supreme goods of life continues. On the one side are those who make wealth supreme, and on the other is the gospel, making the good of humanity supreme. The conflict between these two ideals must be fought to a finish.

2. Fraternity v. Justice

2. The second objection to the social sufficiency of the gospel lies in the fact that, recognizing the legitimacy of this conflict, men are seeking victory in an appeal to justice, rather than to love or fraternity. If by this is meant they are seeking to *give* justice, their position would be identical with that of the gospel. But the struggle between the

classes and the masses today is not to *give* but to *get* justice. The motive of individuals in such a struggle may be thoroughly altruistic, but the conflict has long since passed the individualistic stage and has become a struggle between groups.

Now the appeal to get justice is an old appeal, but at the bottom it is not evangelical. Jesus made this clear in his teaching as to non-resistance. According to him loyalty to the gospel was not an insistence upon one's own rights, but a willingness to surrender such individual rights for the common good. The appeal to justice at first sight seems far more powerful than this call to surrender, for it can utilize an anger born of the sense of injustice and the violation of one's own rights. But such a feeling leads ultimately to the appeal to force. Every revolution is a confession that love has failed to impress men with its absolute supremacy. Where men have to fight to get a just share of privilege, it is evident that other men are fighting not to give such privileges.

The modern struggle between the classes is not in itself necessarily controlled by the gospel. In the same degree as it may seem unavoidable does it argue the insufficiency or the inability of the gospel to transform men's motives into those of love. Many leaders of the present social movement have altogether lost confidence in appeals to altruism and are deliberately fomenting class hatred in expectation of a final struggle in which justice shall be gained. The Christian church must face this situation. It is not enough to say that the gospel is at work when individuals filled with the love of their kind endeavor to incite class

warfare. Such warfare may be the court of last resort, and such individuals may be Christians. But war, like charity, argues the incomplete evangelization of the world and the very effort to stir up hatred is an expression of distrust in the power of love.

3. The Imperfectly Evangelized Church

3. The third ground of distrust of the social sufficiency of the gospel is the imperfect evangelization of that very body that stands for the gospel, the church. The history of the church is a sad commentary on the unwillingness of men to submit themselves to the ideals of the very Christ whom they have declared to be the Son of God. Nor need one think only of the persecutions of the past. There are too many modern churches in which are bickerings, pettiness, and quarrelsomeness worthy of the Corinthians themselves. How comes it to pass that the organization which looks forward so confidently to a share in the triumph of the ideals of Jesus which it claims to embody can indulge in church quarrels and magnify the ideas of rights of majorities and minorities over the spirit of mutual surrender which is the real test of the regenerate life? The churches of many a modern city deserve the rebuke given by Paul to the Corinthians: "Are ye not carnal if ye bite and devour one another?"

The gospel is being put to the severest test in the house of its friends. To churches belong the large proportion of the capitalistic class, that is, those who have particularly enjoyed the blessings of the economic surplus. Rightly or wrongly it is believed to favor those who

have privileges in the social struggle. I believe that there has been a remarkable change in this particular during the last few years, and it is not too late to rectify the misinterpretations from which the church has suffered. But he would be an evil counselor who did not warn the churches that the spectacle of their quarrels over doctrinal and practical details on the one side, and their unwillingness to urge more distinctly upon their members the need of democratizing privilege, serves to decrease confidence in that gospel they profess. "If the salt has lost its savor wherewith is it to be salted?" If the church, the body of the Christ, cannot exemplify love, God will intrust this gospel to some other agency as he once transferred it from the Pharisees to the Gentiles.

II. The Social Sufficiency of the Gospel

Potent as are these objections to the sufficiency of the gospel to salvation I am convinced that they are due to a superficial estimate of the gospel and a confusion of orthodoxy with genuine evangelicalism. A fundamental difficulty with them all is an impatience with human nature. If the conditions which have been mentioned are to be faced frankly as liabilities, there are assets which are just as frankly to be counted.

1. It Breeds Hatred of Injustice

1. In the first place, there is the capacity of the gospel to stir in human hearts a hatred of all injustice and to nerve them to combat every institution that countenances injustice.

Whatever else the eschatological message of Christianity may involve,

it never blinks the issue of the conflict between forces of oppression and forces of righteousness. The coming of the kingdom of God and the triumph of Christ are never set forth in the gospel as a simple and peaceful evolution. The forces of Gog and Magog must be conquered by the forces of the Christ who came to send into the world not peace, but a sword. The non-resistance which Jesus teaches is not passive submission in the presence of injustice done others. The very Christ who taught men not to struggle for their individual rights fought the good fight of faith against the Pharisees who were seeking to belittle the people's rights.

There may be those who with complacent optimism believe that individual and social evolution may be unconsciously transformed into the likeness of the kingdom of God. The gospel never contemplates any such academic victory. It teaches men to practice no auto-suggestion that men or institutions are better than they really are. It knows only too well that there are those who will oppress the weak until they fear to oppress them; that there are institutions in society that must be destroyed, rather than transformed; that there are men who prefer to exploit, rather than to love their fellows; but it teaches also in its wonderful messianic program that God himself will, through his people, put an end to such oppression.

But the hatred inculcated by the gospel is not the hatred inculcated by revolutionary socialism. It is a righteous hatred of unrighteousness and the conflict which it expects is only the last resort by which those men who cannot be induced to be loving shall be deprived

of the control of social forces. A gospel without this blood and iron in its message would be a message of flaccid optimism which would have made impossible every hero of the faith who subdued kingdoms for the sake of larger equality and fraternity.

2. The Co-operative Power of the Gospel

2. In the second place, the gospel, just because it is a much wider term than ecclesiasticism, can find its followers in many an institution which is not strictly religious.

Indeed, it is fair to say that in the same proportion as the church comes under the sway of the gospel does it inspire its members to larger co-operation with other institutions which are seeking, in the evangelical spirit, to bring the ideals of Christ into social life. So clearly are we coming to see that those who are putting the principles of Jesus in operation are not his enemies, is that men are sometimes inclined to be impatient in their criticism of the church. Sometimes they even say that the labor union and fraternal organizations are really more Christian than is the church itself. But such criticism is, after all, unfair to the new spirit which is finding expression in our church activities. Just as churches are themselves learning larger co-operation in spiritual and material service to humanity, are they also finding that the evangelical impulse is a bond of co-operation between their members and non-ecclesiastical movements. It is this impulse to co-operation that so sharply distinguishes the evangelical from the ecclesiastical spirit, and in it lies one of the most cogent reasons for believing that the gospel of love

which can promote the work of friendly co-operation is to maintain itself throughout the entire social order.

3. Its Power to Evoke Sacrifice

3. But even more significant is the power of the gospel actually to produce loving lives whose aim is to *give* rather than to *get* justice. If one looks back over the Christian centuries he will find plenty of imperfections in the church but he will also find that the ideals of the church have always been higher than the ideals of the times to which it belonged. And this superiority has been due, not to the fact that necessarily the church was more learned or better organized, but to the far more striking fact that it has sought, through the spirit of sacrifice, to minister to the needs of the day. True, the most outstanding expressions of this really evangelical spirit have been ameliorative, but he would be a most unfair critic who would deny that as long as there is sin and misery in the world amelioration is necessary and blessed. When one thinks of the sacrifices Christians have made to found hospitals and schools, to give alms and many another form of helpfulness, and then compares such activities with those of non-Christian people, he sees clearly enough that the gospel of a loving Christ and a loving God has had the power to evoke love for men; and if it be true that nowadays we see the spirit of Jesus is not exhausted in efforts to ameliorate but must move over to the abolition of conditions from which misery springs, it is only what we should expect of a Christian spirit that is growing more intelligent. To doubt that the gospel which has evoked self-sacrificing love in the

past is to succeed in evoking the same love under our modern conditions, is to throw history out of the window.

4. The Corroboration of the Gospel by History

4. And this conviction is deepened as one sees the general tendency of social evolution to move toward the ideal of fraternity which Jesus says is to mark the kingdom of God. Recall the wonderful social effects of Christian missions. True, the gospel has been aided by other forces born of Western civilization, but it has also been hindered by them. If occidental commerce were thoroughly Christian, oriental nations would have been far more completely evangelized (in the deepest sense of the word) than they are today. For the gospel itself as it appears in the printed page of the Bible and in the simplest message of the missionary has amazing power to release social forces and correct social injustice.

Nor need we look at the elemental triumphs of the gospel. We can follow the advice of the writer to the Hebrews and pass on to the more complicated evidence of social evolution. If one will study the history of class conflicts where men have fought to gain justice and privileges which should have been freely granted them, a remarkable conclusion seems inevitable: Out of the bitter comes the sweet; out of the conflict has come larger fraternity as well as equality; out of class hatreds has come an appreciable approach toward the democratizing of privilege which is the social expression of the principles of Jesus.

It is not merely that men have found that honesty is the best policy. Often

to their surprise they have found that the extension of privilege is advantageous to all parties combined. In every struggle which has resulted in the extension of privilege the classes who have surrendered privileges have reaped such advantages as to be forced to approve their own defeat. If, as the early fathers so finely said, the soul is naturally Christian, it is just as true that social evolution is teleologically Christian. Individuals, it is true, may lament the lack of privileges which their forefathers may have possessed, but the enriched social life, which has come from the struggle in which their interests were apparently defeated, has brought so many more opportunities that if the choice were possible they would not be ready to exchange the one for the other. What man of South Carolina would re-establish Negro slavery? What man of Massachusetts would re-establish the New England theocracy? One increasing purpose does run through the ages, and that purpose leads, not toward the development of the power of the few over the many, but, although not steadily and always with the possibilities of further struggle, toward that democracy of privilege which is the social equivalent of the kingdom of God. There is no reply to this argument from the general tendency of history except that drawn from the overemphasis of the evil born of the process. And in history as in tracing the course of a river, a man must not mistake the eddies which the river causes for the general direction of the mighty current itself. If there can be detected any purpose in history, it is toward a fraternal democracy. And is not this precisely what the gospel sets

forth in its eschatology, namely, the inevitableness of that social order in which the Heavenly Father is to be supreme and which is to be composed of those who are ready to treat one another as brothers?

5. The Gospel Inculcates Faith in God

5. Another consideration of great moment is one which every Christian must reckon as final. The gospel is sufficient for social salvation because it inculcates life in accordance with the character of God who is Love.

If we hold, as hold we must, that God is immanent in our world, and that his will in some mysterious way gets expression in the course of human events, our faith in him as Father will not permit us to believe that he will permit his world to escape that great process which is the expression of his will. The pessimism which sees escape for the world only in a cataclysm is really a denial of God's presence in his world. We dare attempt to bring the institutions of the world under the control of the principles of love, because we believe that we are working with him. If the gospel is really a power of God unto salvation, it is something more than a power unto the rescue of individuals from a social order. It is the salvation of social evolution itself. And while this places upon the modern-minded Christian a heavier burden of faith than was borne by his predecessors, who looked for rescue rather than for salvation, it is not as heavy a burden as that which would seek to isolate God from his world and deny that his will which rules in the process of the universe has abdicated in human history. Here we face the true Christian philosophy of society: the

impossibility of the exclusion of individuals from the influence of their social environments leads to the deepened conviction that God must express himself in the life of society, as well as in the individual lives which are involved in society. For God is immanent in society.

6. The Power of the Gospel to Evoke Christlike Living

6. And finally it must be said that the gospel is impotent, except as it moves men and women to action in accordance with its ideals.

Here it finds its supreme test, for love means sacrifice. A gospel without the cross is a gospel without truth and without power. Only the cross must not be simply the cross of Jesus but that which every one of his disciples takes as he attempts to follow him. And this vicarious spirit which was revealed so triumphantly on Calvary and in the tomb in the garden must be expressed not only in individual, but in social, groups as well. The chief business of the church is not to make social programs, but to prepare men's hearts to organize social advance. No other institution is attempting to democratize privilege by insisting upon surrender of privilege on the part of those who possess it. Other organizations seek to *gain* justice. The gospel nerves its followers to *give* justice. Christianity alone insists that it is more blessed to give than to receive. It contains a call to a heroism incomparably larger than the call of war. True evangelicalism may or may not be theological orthodoxy, but no man or group of men is actually devoted to the cause of Christ until they practice the Golden Rule in the spirit of sacrifice.

It is an audacious proposal which the gospel thus makes. The lion of the tribe of justice-seekers becomes the lamb of the God of Love. But as we recall the years which have passed since Jesus first taught and embodied this message of Love which, in its impulse to realize itself in service, stops at no sacrifice, we are filled with self-condemning optimism. The blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church, and the church which has so imperfectly, but steadily, embodied the principles of Jesus has in turn taught men how to apply those principles with ever-increasing extension to the social difficulties of the day. In this spirit it must continue to live. The certainty that it will thus live is the fruit of our spiritual loyalty to Jesus.

It is no spectacular service which it thus is called to render to the changing order. It is the service of love that has hatred and opposition only for that which is not born of love. It must carry to the world the ever-deepening conviction that love is the will of God, no matter what its embodiment must cost, and it must educate men into a

sensitiveness as to the rights of others, until instinctively they no longer look upon their own things but upon the things of others. And if such Christlike spirit shall lead them to some Calvary of economic renunciation or Christlike sharing of their goods with the multitudes, the gospel will be only fulfilling its divine mission. For the gospel stakes itself upon the supremacy of love. The church will fulfil its mission as it trains the regenerate life of its members to see the social implication of that regenerate life which is begotten of a Heavenly Father. And as it grasps this supreme mission it will increasingly exhibit the sufficiency of the gospel for social salvation, not by metaphysical creeds but by the test of the apostle himself: Men will be known to love God whom they have not seen as they love their brothers whom they have seen. And the power of social regeneration will be known to be something more than economic efficiency or mere humanitarianism. For it will be seen to be the superhuman might of God who is bringing in his Kingdom.

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

V

THE MODERN CHURCH AND POLITICS

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It is not quite just to the historical situation to call the Thirty Years' War and the wars that followed the Reformation movement "religious wars."

Religion and even ecclesiasticism were only elements in an exceedingly complex situation. The struggle was with feudalism, and as the Roman Catholic